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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/FO, AF/E, AF/RSA
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA-ERITREA BORDER: UNMEE FEARS MORE RESTRICTIONS, PEACE-KEEPERS' WITHDRAWAL

REF: ADDIS ABABA 3624 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CHARGE VICKI HUDDLESTON. REASON: 1.4 (B, D).

¶11. (S) SUMMARY: UNMEE officials told Charge on October 20 that they fear the Eritrean Government will continue to impose new restrictions on its operations in order to increase pressure on the international community to force Ethiopian compliance with the EEBC border decision. UNMEE warned of the possible withdrawal of Jordanian and Indian peace-keepers -- the bulk of UNMEE personnel -- if increasing restrictions further weaken their ability to defend themselves or evacuate. While UNMEE military advisors still characterize the military posture of both sides as "defensive," they point out that the forced redeployment of UNMEE observers following the GSE's ban on helicopter operations has left gaps of up to 600 km between UNMEE posts. Deputy SRSG Azouz Ennifar asked whether the USG could provide detailed satellite imagery to fill the new gaps in UNMEE's ability to physically monitor the border. Ennifar (strictly protect) told the Charge privately that the UNMEE may be consolidating too rapidly in response to the Eritrean flight ban. Ennifar urged that the U.S. act urgently to "cool down" the Eritrean Government and "push" the Ethiopian Government on EEBC implementation. He reiterated his hope that the U.S. will move quickly to appoint an envoy and launch a sustained diplomatic initiative on the border. Post believe that a US envoy -- with previous experience and gravitas -- is needed to calm the situation before it spins up into a new conflict and to get both governments agreement to border demarcation. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (C) Charge, Pol/Econ Counselor and Poloff called on United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (DSRSG) AMB. Azouz Ennifar on October 20 to receive a detailed briefing on the recent redeployment of UNMEE personnel (reftel) in the wake of Eritrea's Oct. 4 ban on helicopter flights. Ennifar was joined by UNMEE Senior Political Affairs Officer Dr. Abdul-Kader Haraiche and Chief Military Liaison Officer Col. Jarmo Helenius.

INDIA AND JORDAN CONSIDERING WITHDRAWAL FROM UNMEE

¶13. (C) DSRSG Ennifar said the UN had not received any response from the Eritrean Government (GSE) to an October 18 letter from UNSYD Annan to President Isaias, which expressed concern about the "major impact" the GSE's flight ban and other restrictions had on UNMEE operations. UNMEE political advisor, Dr. Haraiche said that such restrictions were "disabling" and were likely to increase as the GSE sought to force the international community to enforce the 2002 decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC). He noted that observing the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) from the Ethiopian side of the border would still require coordination with the GSE to avoid aerial patrols from being shot down. Col. Helenius noted that UNMEE lacks the capability to monitor the TSZ via unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and asked if the USG could assist with collection of information via satellite or other means.

¶14. (C) For the last two to three weeks, Ennifar said, UNMEE peace-keepers faced daily violations of the right to freedom of movement, but had not fallen victim to any violent acts. Nevertheless, he added, concern about the safety of peace-keepers had prompted Jordanian and Indian permreps to observe during October 19 UNSC consultations in New York that they were both considering withdrawal of their forces. Ennifar noted that the potential withdrawal of Jordanian and Indian contingents would cripple UNMEE, as they constitute more than two-thirds (India: 1,000; Jordan: 1,300) of UNMEE's current force strength of 3,292.

¶15. (C) UNMEE currently assesses that the deployment of Eritrean and Ethiopian forces is "not offensive in posture." Ennifar added, however, that there was "no doubt" of some military buildup by Eritrea; he confirmed Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's October 19 assertion to the media that additional Eritrean militia had entered the Temporary

Security Zone (TSZ), explaining that Eritrean troops often changed uniforms and returned disguised as militia members. Eritrea had also begun calling up reservists earlier this year. Dr. Haraiche noted that additional reinforcement of Ethiopian troops at the border was also possible in the near future.

MORE THAN HALF OF BORDER AREA GOES UNOBSERVED

¶16. (C) Col. Helenius underscored that with the GSE's restrictions and UNMEE's October 17 decision to vacate 18 of 40 observation posts (reftel), UNMEE faced significant gaps along the 1,100km border: including a 600km "blind spot" in UNMEE's central sector to Bada, and two 100km gaps in the western and eastern sectors. Ground troops could infiltrate through these gaps, he said, but difficult terrain would impede the movement of tracked vehicles. He hypothesized that any offensive by Eritrean forces would likely occur along the same four avenues of approach used during previous hostilities: along the north-south Barentu corridor; along the main road from Asmara to Addis Ababa; from the port of Assab to Ethiopia; and along the western border with Sudan.

APPEAL FOR USG INTERVENTION

¶17. (C) DSRSG Ennifar asked whether, in the absence of aerial patrols that previously accounted for most of UNMEE's monitoring, the USG could provide satellite imagery to help UNMEE monitor the border. Better equipment and capabilities could reduce UNMEE's costs, he added, as UNMEE's force strength (which was already being downsized) could be reduced even further. He also noted that leased helicopters currently cost UNMEE \$15 million annually.

¶18. (C) Ennifar underscored the need for action by the international community, and particularly the United States, to forestall future conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. He added that no action had been taken to address the impasse since the 2002 EEBC decision. He asked if we had any further information on the planned appointment of a U.S. envoy. We responded that we were hopeful but had no further information.

¶19. (S) Ennifar (strictly protect) told the Charge privately that the UN may be overreacting to force protection concerns in the wake of the flight ban, in order to force the UNSC to engage on the border issue. He appealed for UNSC action to press the GSE to reverse its restrictions on UNMEE, and advocated the appointment of a U.S. envoy to the region, noting that some observers considered the "weak" reaction of the United States to Eritrean restrictions on UNMEE tantamount to "giving a blank check to Asmara." Ennifar called for urgent action to "cool down" Eritrea and press Ethiopia, so that the political process could start again. Noting that disputed areas awarded by the EEBC to Ethiopia were largely uninhabitable desert, Ennifar recommended providing Ethiopia with a package of economic incentives: such as guaranteed access to the port of Assab, as well as World Bank assistance to resuscitate Assab's port operations for the joint benefit of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

¶10. (C) Dr. Haraiche observed that while the EEBC declared that its decision would be "final and binding," thereby giving no provision for discussion, article 416 of the 2000 Algiers peace agreement specifies that the UN can use its good offices to facilitate consultations between the parties on implementation.

¶11. (SBU) UNMEE officials noted the lack of any mechanism bringing together Ethiopian and Eritrean representatives, other than the Military Coordination Commission (MCC) headed by UNMEE's force commander, most recently convened two weeks ago in Nairobi. UNMEE has proposed that the next meeting occur in Nairobi on November 18, as both parties refuse to meet in either Addis Ababa or Asmara, citing concerns for the safety of their delegations.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: The GSE's current restrictions on UNMEE, as well as the threat that troop-contributing countries may withdraw contingents, jeopardizing UNMEE's effectiveness as well as setting the stage for a spinning up of tensions on both sides of the border that could result in unintended consequences. This is the ideal time for the USG to name an envoy -- with clout -- who could first calm the roiled waters and then begin the process of resolving the border demarcation dispute. END COMMENT.

HUDDLESTON